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# Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Virpi Timonen. *Beyond Successful and Active Ageing: A Theory of Model Ageing*. Bristol, U.K.: Policy Press, 2016

Reviewed by Susan Pickard, Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Liverpool

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Beginning in the late twentieth century, and for the first time in history, we have learned from official discourses and popular culture that we have choice over how we age. In practice, however, the only legitimate choices are prescribed by the overlapping concepts of successful and active aging. The meaning and consequence of the latter is the focus of this theoretical critique by Virpi Timonen. In this concise format, published in the useful Policy Press Shorts series, she examines these “model” or ideal prescriptions for aging behaviour before going on to identify problems that result from establishing ideal ways of aging more generally. She then constructs a theory of ideal or model aging capable of mapping the links between the various forms found in academic, clinical, commercial, and policy literature, the better to understand the underlying origins, mechanics, and consequences of this approach. She claims (correctly, I believe) that this is the first time such a project has been undertaken. This undertaking is theory-driven and she explains that she finds the “paradoxes, puzzles and contradictions” that surround “scripts around ageing” to be theoretically rich, inspiring questions such as “why do they exist?”, “what do they tell us?”, “whose interests do they serve”? Her aim is to illuminate the interface between the macro level of policy ambitions and the micro level of individual old people’s experience, to test the “fit”.

In chapters two and three, she undertakes a genealogical exploration of the concept of successful aging and active aging respectively. Successful aging has acquired numerous definitions (one study that the author cites identified 105 operational definitions). This has both positive and negative connotations. On the positive side, it suggests an enormous appetite for successful aging: to define it, to identify who is living it. But on the negative, the lack of consensus over meaning is one of many problems which also include (1) the lack of convergence of the views of professionals and older people on what success means; and (2) its “democratic” or all-inclusive definition to the point of meaninglessness, for example, including people with dementia, in a somewhat patronising gesture of encouragement (and exhortation) to all. Indeed, the most serious downside of such capaciousness is the creeping expectation that

everyone without exception will be required to age successfully. Another good point is that it offers “a re-orientation away from loss and pathology and towards growth, adjustment and adherence to patterns adopted in mid-life” (p. 33). But this is also a weak point: Not only does it not admit anything unique to old age per se, but it is also elitist in that those who can follow its recommendations are likely to be those who are already successfully aging.

A second point that emerges from the genealogical exploration is that active aging has been adapted from the more theoretical successful aging and applied within the policy world. It is described as the “foremost policy response to the challenges of population ageing” (p. 35) in Europe. But, like successful aging, it focuses on individual action. For example, the European Council’s Guiding Principles on Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations centre on three principles: employment, participation in society (including communities and families), and independent living. Like successful aging, all three emphasise self-care and autonomy in old age. More explicitly than successful aging still, it implies that, unless (re)constituted along these lines, old age is a burden to society, characterised by dependency and illness.

In chapter four, she critiques concrete examples of attempts to apply the three principles or “holy trinity” of living independently, working longer and being socially productive in different countries and contexts and finds that each advantage older adults with particular attributes – desire to self-care, good health, supportive social networks – and resources – such as good housing – which, furthermore, they have enjoyed all their lives. The (incorrect) assumption that everyone will age successfully if they are incentivised to change then becomes the rationale to thin out traditional welfare services. In her concluding chapter, she sets out some general principles underpinning modelling aging, which reiterate the individualistic approach that expects the most disadvantaged older people to change the most, with the aim of controlling costs by shifting responsibility for solutions onto older people themselves, and turning them into benefits or

profit where possible. The theory makes it clear how and why, in this approach, aging will thus become a new vehicle of social exclusion.

The problem with modern power, as Foucault drew to our attention, is that it is simultaneously productive and oppressive. Successful aging clearly identifies a valuable collection of attributes, albeit ones beyond the reach of many. Yet perhaps the biggest downside is that, given its privileged position across fields and disciplines, successful aging /active aging becomes taken for granted as aging well per se. This means that although it is not the only way to age well – as we know from historical accounts and valued attributes in non-Western societies – alternative value schemes eventually become both unimaginable and inarticulable within this paradigm. This process is not in fact

unique to old age, but is occurring at all points in the life course where the model of the entrepreneurial self asserts the same attributes of value at every life stage – self-care, docility, responsibility, citizenship as defined through productivity and consumption – as the only “good” way to be a subject of any age. This model clearly serves the interests of those who benefit from shrinking the state – transnational corporations, global finance, retrenching governments armed with an “austerity” remit and the like – and who seek legitimacy in the individualization of inequality. As such, the book’s arguments appear all the stronger when read alongside those texts that seek to explore the possibilities of a valuable social role in old age and a personally meaningful way to age, and indeed to live, outside these frameworks.